

The vices of denunciation

The Cranky Professor

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People who attempt to shout people down or to shut people up must be aware that they're helping to publicize the ideas or attitudes against which they're fighting.

Remember the disruptive protest a couple years ago here at Saint Mary's, the one that forced Jose Ruba, a pro-life speaker, off campus? The protesters surely knew that because of their antics, Ruba would be given all sorts of opportunities in the days following to get his message out.

Or consider the case in Alberta of Stephen Boissoin, who had a letter against homosexuality published in his local paper. The man who complained about the letter to the provincial human rights commission surely knew that because of his complaint, both the content of Boissoin's letter and its choicest phrases would quickly travel throughout the country and beyond. The Alberta official who subsequently ordered Boissoin not to speak his views on homosexuality must have known that she was inciting great numbers of others to take up the task for him.

The would-be silencers, then, certainly know that their tactics will ensure the wide circulation of what they despise. But that makes their behaviour paradoxical only under the assumption that they do what they do intending to prevent ideas or attitudes from being heard. Give up that assumption, and it all becomes clear. They're not seeking to suppress any message. Rather, they're seeking to make known that they stand against that message. They intend to be seen standing against it, and that requires making the "it" they reject widely known.

We can call what they do denunciation. Of course, almost always to stand against something is to denounce it. But the tactics I have in mind—shouting the speaker down, complaining to a human rights commission, ordering a sign down (as the Saint Mary's University Students' Association recently did)—create instances of mere denunciation, for they reject discussion or argument. They serve simply to set oneself up as in favour of the right and true and against the wrong and bad. Denunciation in these cases is not a part of a larger critique. It's its own point.

Well, what's so bad about that? Perhaps, sometimes, mere denunciation is just what's called for. After all, mere denunciation can have valuable social effects, or so one might suppose.

For instance, by being seen to stand against racism, say, or against those who would display a vaguely pro-life message to delicate students standing in line at Tim

Hortons, a denouncer can give hope and strength to those who suffer. One is communicating one's concern and solidarity, and that can ease a person's burden.

Denouncing might be especially helpful or inspiring when it's done by a recognized authority. When Saint Mary's University said no to the cartoons of Mohammed by ordering them off a professor's door, or when the Saskatchewan Human Rights Tribunal fined Bill Whatcott \$17,000 for complaining about all the sodomy going on in our schools these days, the marginalized could take heart that powerful institutions were on their side.

Canadian human rights commissions and tribunals fight the good fight, then, not by suppressing evil words or feelings, but by showing the targets of evil words and feelings that the commissions and, by extension, Canadians in general feel their pain and will stand on their behalf. That the speakers of evil get publicly and officially shamed adds a tasty bit of vengeance and warning to the mix.

Mere denunciation can, in addition, help to publicize injustices the mainstream media hasn't noticed or, worse, has chosen to ignore. It can keep unpopular but righteous causes alive. Perhaps we saw this in the disruption of a talk Christie Blatchford, the *Globe and Mail* columnist, was to give in Waterloo. Blatchford wanted to talk about poor policing, but for the disrupters Blatchford's visit was an excellent opportunity to bring attention to First Nation land claims and to the perfidy of the settler government. Arguably, these are topics both more significant and less well understood than the police-supported lawlessness in Caledonia that concerned Blatchford.

Finally, mere denunciation can send a clear and strong message to politicians or other authorities just what side the bread is buttered on. Better not to raise a contentious issue than to court denunciation.

For all that, then, and given our concern for the marginalized or impoverished in our communities, why is mere denunciation nonetheless odious?

Precisely because it rejects investigation, critique, and discussion. The matter here is ultimately about how we want to live. Do we want to live as though those who would criticize us or mock our values are thereby harming us, such that we need others, authorities, if possible, to stand beside us feeling our pain? Or do we want to live as thinking people, people able to evaluate for ourselves the ideas and attitudes we encounter, to accept or reject them on what we take to be their merits?

If we want to live as people who don't merely react to words but who respond to them on the basis of their evaluations of their worth, we won't go in for mere denunciation. We will want, instead, to reveal through discussion that what we reject is false or ignoble. That's why people who aspire to live as thinkers will not occupy a stage or shout down a speaker or complain to a human rights commission or to the president of their students' association. Instead, they'll wait their turn and respond with arguments.

The most worrisome objection to my proposal that we live as thinkers is that we simply aren't strong enough to do so successfully. We lack the character needed to live that strenuously. Because we are weak, the objection concludes, we will have to rely on mere denunciation to give us confidence in our values.

It really is a matter of how we want to live. So let us be clear that right now, those who would have us live weakly are the ones in charge.

